

Seeing like a Princely State

American Institute of Pakistan Studies Summer Research Grant
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Final Report, pt. 1: Narrative of Effect of Research on Field of Pakistan Studies

When fully realized, the effect of this research will be to better integrate Pakistan studies into both South Asian studies and the emergent field of Persianate studies. Narrowly and literally conceived, the field of Pakistan studies is limited to the period from 1947 to the present. Pakistan's heritage and historical sources, however, are much richer and extend far back before independence, despite the fact that they are rarely used to contribute to larger debates in lateral fields. For instance: what was the nature of semi-colonialism in South Asian princely states – including those (such as Bahawalpur) located on modern Pakistani territory? What was the range of Sufi networks spanning across Asia, in many cases rooted in cities now located in Pakistan?

My brief time in Lahore demonstrated that Pakistan was very much situated within a common zone of Persianate exchange connecting Central and South Asia. For instance, even though the princely state of Hyderabad was integrated into India after independence, numerous Persian manuscripts (such as “newsreports” from the Nizam's court) and rare Urdu publications dealing with Hyderabad were collected in Lahore and remain there to the present day. Along the socio-religious vector, records housed in both the Lahore Archive and Punjab University Library reveal that Sufi masters were trained by Central Asian teachers and then passed on their skillset to disciples that traveled even further southwards into the Deccan.

Research agendas such as this one promise to play a role in reestablishing Pakistan studies' central role in the history of Persianate high culture, colonialism, and transregional Islam. Great Islamicate cities such as Lahore and Multan were the glue that bound Bukhara to Delhi, Kashgar to Hyderabad – nodes in a cosmopolitan world much greater than the sum of its national successor-state parts. The historical resources for recovering this world remain largely untapped in Pakistani archives and libraries, but new directions of historical inquiry may reveal a world quite different than the one dominant today.